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Beckett's Vessels and the Animation of Containers

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Samuel Beckett's novels and plays are filled with lively vessels: emergent sites of subjectivity that blur the borderline between the human and nonhuman. When Malone Dies *is read next to anthropological theories of the homunculus, a protocol of container animation emerges. Vital to this process is André Breton's image of the communicating vessels, a visual metaphor Beckett revises in* The Unnamable. *By adopting material containers as surrogate bodies, or by imagining life in hollow vessels, Beckett's characters encounter a self that exceeds the limits of the body—a form of projective identification that anticipates psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion's theorizing of the "container-contained."*

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> There was much talk at Hayden's of a bottle (it was empty), its curve of course, and then other unique peculiarities. I told him that he had never seen a bottle in his life. But it seems it is only poets that do not see bottles.
>
> —Samuel Beckett to Georges Duthuit (*Letters II* 117–8)

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Just as Samuel Beckett describes the advent of a "no-man's land" between the subject and "the world of objects" in his essay "Recent Irish Poetry," his prose and plays often explore the gray area between the human and the non-human: objects that are almost human, humans that are almost objects (*Disjecta* 70). In most cases, where this type of thinking is present, we also find a vessel of some kind. While the bodies of Nagg and Nell might merely be hidden within *Endgame*'s ashcans, in *Play* the distinction is not so clear, for Beckett's stage directions describe "faces so lost to age and aspect as to seem almost part of urns" (*Dramatic Works* 307). While Molloy conceives of himself as a "sealed jar [. . .] well preserved," the Unnamable is actually contained within a jar, padded first with stone, then with sawdust (*Molloy* 48). Shortly after Watt begins to question if Mr. Knott's pot is, in fact, a pot, he also wonders if he himself is a container instead of a man.

> As for himself, though he could no longer call it a man, as he had used to do, with the intuition that he was perhaps not talking nonsense, yet he could not imagine what else to call it, if not a man. But Watt's imagination had never been a lively one. So he continued to think of himself as a man [. . . .] But for all the relief that this afforded him, he might just as well have thought of himself as a box, or an urn. (*Watt* 69)

There is a historical Irish precursor for these images, which explicitly surfaces in *The Unnamable* through the figure of Billy in the Bowl. Noting that his next "vice-exister" will be a "billy in the bowl," the Unnamable imagines a man "with his bowl on his head and his arse in the dust" (26). "Billy," opaquely alluded to in *Rough for Theatre I*, which opens with the blind Billy sitting before his alms bowl, refers to a possibly apocryphal character from the streets of eighteenth century Dublin. A legless panhandler, "Billy in the Bowl" dragged himself about on his hands, his body embedded in a large cauldron fortified with iron. Rumored to be a particularly dangerous character, he would lie in wait for his victims behind a row of hedges on a lonely country road. As James Collins records in *Life in Old Dublin*, "[Passers-by], struck by his peculiar circumstances, stepped aside to view the strange sight—half man, half-bowl—and were soon undone in one way or another" (78). One has to wonder if the danger of Billy came not only from his violent temperament, but also a fear and distrust of his hybridity, a taboo against the comingling of bowl and body.

While "Billy in the bowl" was a phrase in circulation during Beckett's early years in Ireland, it also surfaces in a number of cultural artifacts with which he was likely acquainted, such as the well-known Irish street ballad of the early nineteenth century, "Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye," later rewritten as the American Civil War Ballad, "When Johnny Comes Marching Home." The verse of note reads:

> You haven't an arm and you haven't a leg,
> You're an eyeless, noseless, chickenless egg;
> You'll have to be put in a bowl to beg
> Johnny I hardly knew ye. (Blaisdell 53)

This unique image of an eyeless, noseless, chickenless egg—the amputee become effaced ellipsoid—serves as a template for *The Unnamable*'s narrator, who asks, "why should I have a sex, if I no longer have a nose?" and questions if he is not, in fact, a "medium egg" (15–6). The eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were full of figures like Billy. Take, for instance, the sixth plate from William Hogarth's 1747 series *Industry and Idleness*, entitled "The Industrious 'Prentice out of his Time, & Married to his Master's Daughter." We do not find the Irish Billy in the Bowl, but rather an English figure referred to by some as Philip in the Tub, a man known for reciting epithalamiums in exchange for food and drink (Hogarth and Clerk 44). In the engraving, the legless man leans forward from a washbasin, proffering a poem titled "Jesse or the Happy Pair. A new Song." There is a French Billy as well, which Beckett may have encountered in Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*, where a *cul-de-jatte* (literally "bottom of a bowl" or "basin-arse") appears in a chapter aptly titled *La Cruche Cassée* [the broken jug] (124).[1]

While "Billy in the bowl," "Philip in the tub," and the *cul-de-jatte* serve as historical precedents for Beckett's figures, they do not elucidate the conceptual link: what does it mean to conceive of a body as a vessel, or, a vessel as a body? What is it about Beckett's containers that makes them seem at once so contently bound to their materiality and so keen to serve as emergent sites of subjectivity, at once so mundane and so almost human? I will pursue the latter question as a means of revealing an aspect of the former. I argue that vessels serve as melting pots, so to speak, through which Beckett can think through questions regarding the incongruity of the body and the self. Vital to this inquiry is André Breton's image of the communicating vessels, a visual metaphor Beckett revises in *The Unnamable*. By adopting material containers as surrogate bodies, or by projecting life into hollow vessels, Beckett's characters encounter the self beyond the body—a form of projective identification that anticipates psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion's theorizing of the "container-contained." Even Murphy, a character who fantasizes complete containment, eventually succumbs to this blending—as his body is cremated and irreversibly mixed with the object world.

MALONE AND THE HOMUNCULUS

In the spirit of The Unnamable, who orders us to "go through the motions of starting again," we must begin with a simple observation: vessels demarcate an interior and exterior (129). They enclose and contain an inner space cordoned off from the outer world—a metaphor often applied to the dualistic perception of an inner self enclosed within the body. Certain anthropologists (Gell, Gutherie) believe this notion of the body-as-container is an almost hard-wired human experience, similar to what linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson call The Container Metaphor in language (29). On the Beckett front, there has been a recent interest in notions of containment by scholars like David Foster, Ciaran Ross, Kathryn White, and a continued charting of the porous borderlines between the human and nonhuman by Ulrika Maude, Garin Dowd, and Yoshiki

Tajiri. I contribute to these dialogues by suggesting that the two conversations are intimately intertwined—that, like the genie's bottle, the space offset by Beckett's vessels bridge worlds material and immaterial through a mechanism of container animation.

The theoretical underpinning for this approach to vessels can be found in Alfred Gell's writing on the homunculus. In *Art and Agency,* Gell describes what he calls the homunculus effect. Defining it simply, the homunculus is an enveloped subject. It is a way of describing Cartesian dualism, modeling how the "I" of consciousness is locked away in the body. Gell sees this relationship—between an inner, enclosed cavity and the outer, external world—as fundamentally human. Gell states, "the indexical form of the mind/body contrast is primordially *spatial and concentric*; the mind is 'internal' enclosed, surrounded, by something (the body) that is non-mind. Now we begin to see why idols are so often hollow envelopes, with enclosures" (132–3; emphasis in original). To enclose an icon is to give it life, to animate it through concealment, the way the human "I" is itself enclosed and concealed. For anthropologists like Gell, creating material homunculi is a way of animating the object world.

> Suppose, instead of drilling "eye" holes in [a] spherical idol, we leave it as it is, but place it in a box, an arc. At this moment it becomes possible to think of the spherical idol in a different way; we can easily suppose that the stone inside the box is the locus of agency, intention, etc. and the ark is the sacred "vessel" which, body-like, contains and protects this locus of agency. (124)

Rather than reading the homunculus and its animus as some kind of diachronic symbol held up by a certain culture or ritualistic practice, Gell universalizes the claim and argues that "there is a certain cognitive naturalness of the idea of the mind or soul or spirit as a homunculus; that is, like a person but *contained within* a person" (131; emphasis in original). The homunculus becomes a visual corollary to the way in which we project and posit consciousness inside those around us, the way in which we visualize our own split between a life interior and exterior. By enclosing a small object—a stone, a marble, a piece of wood—in a hollow envelope, one can create a material representation of interiority. As Gell makes clear, widening his argument to include contemporary, secular examples, the "homunculus-effect" can be achieved wherever there is concentricity and containment.

Beckett would have been familiar with the notion of the homunculus from his reading of Descartes.[2] In *Malone Dies*, Malone even describes his "want of a homuncule" (56). Shortly after this passage, deprived of human company, Malone turns to the task of forming homunculi by creating small, emotional objects. Coming across the bowl of a smoking pipe in a field, he bends down to pick it up.

> Perhaps I thought [the pipe-bowl] pretty, or felt for it that foul feeling of pity I have so often felt in the presence of things, especially little portable things in wood and stone, and which made me wish to have them about me and keep them always, so that I stooped and picked them up and put them in my pocket, often with tears. (76)

What is behind Malone's pity? We should remember that "pity" and "piety" share the Latinate root *pietas*, meaning fulfillment of duties to family, country, and god. *Pietas* can also connote affection and compassion when applied to family members and friends (*OED*). This familial sense of pity surfaces again when Malone discusses his little objects as a surrogate society. "And but for the company of these little objects which I picked up here and there, when out walking, and which sometimes gave me the impression that they too needed me, I might have been reduced to a society of nice people" (76). Malone is able to avoid a society of nice people because his little objects approximate human companions, for he endows them with certain human capacities: agency and animism.

Tellingly, Malone seems only to feel this way about objects that enclose or are themselves enclosed. He reappropriates the pipe-bowl as what he calls a "receptacle" and goes as far as to fashion a "little cap" for it, as if it had a head (77). Other objects only become "treasures," after he begins to contain them within the cavities of his body, forming impromptu homunculi. He holds stones in his hands, buttons in his mouth, lies on top of scraps of papers, and places other objects deep in his pockets, "talking to them" and "reassuring them" (76). At any moment, Malone fears that these simple objects might get away, as if they are animate, semi-human agents. "I shall hold my photograph in my hand, my stone, so that they can't get away. […] Perhaps I shall have something in my mouth, my scrap of newspaper perhaps, or my buttons, and I shall be lying on other treasures still" (79–80). Like the pipe-bowl, an object of enclosure that Malone believes needs him and his pity, the hard shapely objects come to need reassurance once enclosed in his deep pockets. By creating homunculi, Malone elevates these objects into an emotional register.

Malone not only conceives of these homunculi as emotional subjects, but—moving in the other direction—he himself begins to resemble an emotional object. Talking about the way he eats and excretes, for example, he writes: "When I want to eat I hook the table with my stick and draw it to me … It is soup … When my chamber-pot is full I put it on the table, beside the dish … What matters is to eat and excrete. Dish and pot, dish and pot, these are the poles" (9). In this schema, Malone becomes the processing tube in a machine of digestion: the temporary holding chamber between two vessels. When, a page later, he says that his body is "what is called, unadvisedly perhaps, impotent," one cannot help but hear a pun (10). Malone might be impotent—he might lack the virility of his youth—but his body is also in-*potted*. It is one in a series of pots. In *Molloy,* Moran is similarly bounded, but by empty containers. On one side of a similar digestive assemblage are the pots in which Martha prepares his stew: "I peered into the pots. Irish stew. A nourishing and economical dish, if a little indigestible" (101). Shortly after this kitchen scene, Moran peers into another pot, this time at the opposite end of digestion: "We bent together over the pot which at length I took by the handle and tilted from side to side … How can you hope to shit, I said, when you've nothing in your stomach?" (114). Nothingness pervades Moran's potty interest in digestion. The chamber pot is empty, his son Jacques's stomach is empty, even

their indigestible food is empty, in a sense, for it becomes a container voided of its capacity to convey nutrition. Read in the larger context of Beckett's work, where bodies often blend and blur with urns, and men forget if they are not, in fact, containers, the distinction between cooking pots, stomachs, and toilets is more nomenclatural than ontological.

Beckett, then, offers a revision of Gell's system—showing that animism is bi-directional movement, and that the borderline between the animate and the inanimate can be crossed from both sides. That is, not only can homunculi be elevated through a network of social relations to the state of emotional quasi-subjects, human subjects can be reduced, through this very same network, to the state of quasi-object. Beckett collapses the distance between the human and the homunculus by enfolding them within each other. Malone's emotional objects become prosthetic extensions of his body, just as his body becomes a continuation of his dish and pot. Beckett's vessels expand notions of subjectivity, agency, and animism beyond the contours of the human form. If a well-wrought pot can emotionally affect a human subject to feel pity, need, and comfort, and if that human subject can find containment and enclosure in a non-biological body, the distinction between organic life and inorganic matter begins to break down.

COMMUNICATING VESSELS

This porosity between containers is what Beckett calls "communicating vessels" in a letter to Tonny Clerx on 11 April 1963:

> Communicating vessels. This was an experiment invented by Galileo Galilei, with interconnected vessels of different shapes, to carry out research into the conditions of equilibrium of liquids. Any change in one vessel (density, level) is felt throughout the whole system. (*Letters III* 536)

What Beckett is referring to is a simple scientific demonstration of Pascal's law or "the principle of transmission of fluid-pressure." Two vessels are connected by a tube or pipe; if liquid is added to one vessel, raising the fluid level, the other vessel adjusts to maintain equilibrium. While these containers surface in *Molloy* as "Galileo's vessels," they find a sustained treatment in *The Unnamable*, where communicating containers become the material conspirators feeding the narrator's paranoia (90). Wishing that that instead of having to speak, he had some sort of task to do with his "hands or feet, some little job, sorting things for example, or simply arranging things," the Unnamable imagines moving water from one vessel to another with a thimble (115).

The exercise quickly devolves into a procedural system reminiscent of Molloy's sucking stone circulations or Watt's walking permutations.

> I can see it from here, they would contrive things in such a way that I couldn't suspect the two vessels, the one to be emptied and the one to be filled, of being in reality one and the same, it would be water, water, with my thimble I'd go and draw it from one container and then I'd go and pour it into another. (115)

In the Unnamable's paranoid fantasy, when he draws water from one container and pours it into another, underground—unbeknownst to him—the containers are connected by an unseen pipe. "To be emptied, and filled, in a certain way, a certain order, in accordance with certain homologies, the word is not too strong, so that I'd have to think, tanks, communicating, communicating, connected by pipes under the floor, I can see it from here, always showing the same level" (116). When read next to Beckett's description in *Proust* of time as a decantation from one vessel to another, the Unnamable's imagined task becomes Sisyphean. "The individual is the seat of a constant process of decantation, decantation from the vessel containing the fluid of future time, sluggish, pale and monochrome, to the vessel containing the fluid of past time, agitated and multicoloured by the phenomena of its hours" (*Proust* 15). Rather than decanting time, the communicating vessels produce temporal stasis. The Unnamable goes as far as to imagine that his tormentors would create false hopes for him, using "pipes and taps" to temporarily adjust the water level and create the illusion of progress amidst his otherwise eternal torment (116). The communication between vessels always results in equilibrium, rendering all labor lost.

The connected vessels in *The Unnamable* are anticipated in *Murphy*, where "two buckets" become a metaphor for the state of humanity. "'Humanity is a well with two buckets," said Wylie, "one going down to be filled, the other coming up to be emptied"' (39). Curiously, examining the "Whoroscope" Notebook held at the University of Reading—in which Beckett first jotted down the quotation—I found it inverted: "a well with two buckets. While one goes up to be filled, another goes down to be emptied. Such is the state of all humanity" (MS3000/11).[3] While this might have been a transcriptional error on Beckett's part, the inversion of filling and emptying foreshadows the Unnamable's revision of *Proust*'s linear temporal decantation. We find a similar idea in *Waiting for Godot*, where Pozzo claims that "[t]he tears of the world are a constant quality. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops" (*Dramatic Works* 33). Communicating vessels create community, diffusing the suffering of an individual across a hodgepodge of interpenetrating bodies, to borrow a phrase from Deleuze and Guattari.

This communication between these containers is more than the movement of fluids; the word denotes intelligence, agency, and intention. While Malone's homunculi communicate pity, need, and comfort, the Unnamable's vessels communicate conspiracy. It is important to draw a distinction here between affective projection and phenomenological classification. Malone and The Unnamable are not mistaking inanimate containers for organic bodies; rather, when confronted with material representations of interiority through vessel-like forms, they project an affective response into and onto these containers, creating mirrored encounters with their fragmented selves. As such, communicating vessels and emotional homunculi are representations of the self beyond the body, external containers for an expanded conception of subjectivity. As Marta Figlerowicz writes in a study of character construction, "What Beckett seems most interested in are the affective reactions this instability of personal boundaries can cause" (79). By destabilizing

the boundaries between the "I" and the "not I," to use one of his familiar tropes, Beckett's characters expand beyond their bodily delimitations, and in doing so, produce a need for semi-animate objects to contain these disembodied aspects of self.

Beckett's use of affective projection preempts Wilfred Bion's development of the psychoanalytic concept of the "container-contained." First discernable in Bion's *Elements of Psychoanalysis,* the relationship between the container and the contained rests upon Melanie Klein's notion of projective identification. In Bion's schema, objects in the external world can serve as containers for expelled psychic content—thoughts and feelings that the ego cannot contain. In an infant psyche, these containers correspond to a preservation function. "The container [*contenant*], properly so called, is still, stable, and forms a passive receptacle where the baby may store its sensations/images/affects, which in this way are neutralized and preserved" (Anzieu 101).

This function, at first preservative, becomes destructive in the unhealthy adult psyche. For the split schizophrenic, the expulsed contents of self take the form of now hostile objects. As Bion explains in *Second Thoughts*:

> In the patient's phantasy the expelled particles of ego lead to an independent and uncontrolled existence outside the personality, but either containing or contained by external objects, where they exercise their functions as if the ordeal to which they have been subjected has served only to increase their number and to provoke their hostility to the psyche that ejected them. (39)

The most curious (and cryptic) side-effect of schizophrenic projective identification is the subject's loss of ability to distinguish between figurative objects of thought and "real" objects in the world. Bion's schizophrenic is thinking with things in the most literal sense of the term. Unfortunately for the patient, having his materials of thought exist outside of his psyche's container is too much to withstand, and so the contents are often perceived as turning back, destructively, upon the original container (Bion, *Memoir* 38). At the beginning of Beckett's career, when he enigmatically writes in *Proust* about how "the whisky bears a grudge against the decanter" (21–22), he seems to anticipate similar unrest. Nowhere is this tension between the contained and the uncontained more palpable in Beckett's work than in *Murphy*, a novel that was written concurrently with his analysis by Bion. As Anzieu argues, *Murphy* stages the formative encounter between Beckett and Bion, and, as I will argue, their respective visions of containment (Schoolcraft 167).[4]

THE CONTAINER AND CONTAINED

Beckett probably first found the figure of the communicating vessels in André Breton's surrealist manifesto, *Les Vases Communicants* (Cohn 131). For Breton, the image of two vessels achieving relational equilibrium by means of a tube comes to serve as metonymic stand-in for surrealist thought.

> Everything I love, everything I think and feel, predisposes me towards a particular philosophy of immanence according to which surreality would be embodied in reality itself and would be neither superior nor exterior to it. And reciprocally, too, because the container would also be the contents. What I envisage is almost a communicating vessel between the container and the contained. (*Vessels* 46)

Breton's last sentence is rather difficult to envision. If the container and contained are configured as communicating vessels, what is communicated? What fills and flows between the chambers of container and contained?

These vessels might be best represented in the mathematical figure of the Klein bottle.[5] A non-orientable surface, the Klein bottle is a cousin of the Möbius strip without edges or bounds. Because the bottle dissolves the distinction between inside and outside, everything that contains the Klein bottle is also contained by it. Philosopher Michel Serres rightly describes the Klein bottle as a homunculus-like figure, for its contours model the paradoxical qualities of human consciousness.

> [. . .] that the small, monstrous homunculus, each part of which is proportional to the magnitude of the sensations it feels, increases in size and swells at these automorphic points, when the skin tissue folds in on itself. Skin on skin becomes conscious [. . . .] Without this folding, without the contact of the self on itself, there would truly be no internal sense, no body properly speaking [. . . .] Klein bottles are a model of identity. We are the bearers of skewed, not quite flat, unreplicated surfaces, deserts over which consciousness passes fleetingly, leaving no memory. (22)

Just as Malone's homunculi approximate the self-interior, the Klein bottle's folding surface mimics the porous borderline of the skin and the internalized quality of perception. Like the mind of Murphy, which "excluded nothing that it did not itself contain" (*Murphy* 69), the Klein bottle is in the world, but, at the same time, the world resides within the Klein bottle. In fact, Beckett's double negatives obfuscate the statement, which can be rewritten as: "for everything, if Murphy's mind did exclude it, then Murphy's mind did not exclude it," or, in symbolic logic, $\forall x\,(Dx \rightarrow \sim Dx)$. This, of course, is a contradiction. If we are to take Beckett's claim about Murphy's mind seriously, which is a described as an "empty bottle" several pages later, the only solution to this paradox of simultaneous containment and exclusion is to conceive of Murphy's mind as a Klein bottle-like container: wrapping around into a fourth-dimension, excluding everything, while simultaneously containing everything (74). When Breton talks about a container that contains its contents, but whose contents are simultaneously the container itself, he is utilizing this same twisting logic.

Despite Murphy's Klein bottle mind, the novel is rife with an anxiety arising from porosity, and brims with a desire for the borders of the body to become rigid and impenetrable. It is not surprising that Beckett's most traditional novel features his most prosthetically conservative protagonist. Moving from the largest matryoshka-like container to the smallest, we find first the various cells and buildings that enclose Murphy throughout the novel—his mew in West Brompton,

Celia's room on Brewery Road, and the garret in Magdalen Mental Mercyseat. These shelters serve as protective barriers to keep the inner world distinct from the outer. "Within the narrow limits of domestic architecture he had never been able to imagine a more creditable representation of what he kept on calling, indefatigably, the little world" (114). To make the big world—the outer, containing environment of his body—an extension of the little world—the empty psychic space of meditation—is the goal.

The ideal container for Murphy would be the padded cell of the psychiatric ward: "The pads surpassed by far all he had even been able to imagine in the way of indoor bowers of bliss. [. . .] The temperature was such that only total nudity could do it justice. No system of ventilation appeared to dispel the illusion of respirable vacuum" (113–4). The padded cell takes on the aspects of the skull, a respirable vacuum with an aperture, invoking the skull-like dimensions of the room in *Endgame* and Malone's haunting question—"And in the skull is it a vacuum?" (48). The justice of "total nudity" and the sexualized allusion to Spenser's "bower of bliss" also evokes intrauterine imagery, memories of the womb Beckett began to recover during his writing of *Murphy* (Knowlson 171). As if to further underscore the possibility of airtight containment within the padded cell, a hypomanic is described as bouncing "off the walls like a bluebottle in a jar" (*Murphy* 154). Here we find a reiteration of *Murphy*'s nested containment. The bluebottle, a common housefly, becomes a blue bottle through phonetic association—offering an image of a bottle within a jar, a container contained.

Between domestic architecture and Murphy's body, there is his suit. The jacket, "a tube in its own right," exhibits "an autonomy of hang" that contains his body like "the mouth of a bell" (47). This bell-like suit anticipates Malone's hat, which "has lost its brim, [and] looks like a bell-glass to put over a melon" (78). The "corkscrew effect" that betrays the fatigue of Murphy's trousers conjures associations of corked bottles and sealed containers. The material of his suit is even described "holeproof" by its makers. "This was true in the sense that it was entirely non-porous. It admitted no air from the outer world, it allowed none of Murphy's own vapours to escape" (47). Like the padded cell in which Murphy is most at home, his hole-proof suit becomes a fantastic non-porous membrane, an ideal skin to quarantine his body from the rest of the world.

Moving a further layer of containment inward, we encounter Murphy's body—a container for his mind. In order to gain a satisfying level of consciousness, he must first quiet his body, "for it was not until his body was appeased that he could come alive in his mind" (4). In fact, Murphy even fantasizes about surrendering control of his body's inhalation—one of the nervous system's most ingrained and unconscious functions—in order to better think. '"The last time I saw him,' said Neary, 'he was saving up for a Drinker artificial respiration machine to get into when he was fed up breathing'" (33). Another second skin of sorts, the Drinker method of artificial respiration (also known as the iron lung) was invented by Harvard engineer Philip Drinker in 1928, and involves placing the

body in a pressurized container, leaving only the head exposed (Rothman 42). The iron lung becomes a visual precursor for the mound in *Happy Days*, the ashcans in *Endgame*, and the urns in *Play*, as well as the mechanical telos of Murphy's rocking chair—a machine that, in a cyborg-like fashion, rhythmically regulates the body so the mind can wander free.

The most understudied communicating vessel in *Murphy* could be the Leyden Jar, a container rich with historical and technical associations. "The development of what looked like collusion between such utter strangers remained to Murphy as unintelligible as telekinesis or the Leyden Jar, and of as little interest" (71). Developed in 1745 by Pieter van Musschenbroek, the Leyden jar was the proto electric capacitor, a device allowing scientists to "accumulate for the first time large amounts of electricity in a storage container" (Sconce 30). The technology was later appropriated by Italian scientist Luigi Galvani, the father of galvanism (31). While it is unclear whether Beckett was directly acquainted with Galvani's work, he certainly was exposed to the name and some associated concepts through his reading of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which borrows "the enchantment of the heart" from Galvani (192). In *Murphy*, the narrator's statement that the jar is as "unintelligible" as telekinesis is a claim about the jar's ability to communicate charge through a seemingly impermeable glass jar, a transmission very much akin to the almost telekinetic communication between the Unnamable's vessels. It is also a device that threatens the desired non-communicability between Murphy's closed spheres.

Despite Murphy's desire for complete enclosure, his nested world is continually undermined. The novel ends with a comic disavowal of containment when Murphy is cremated and his ashes scattered across the floor of a pub. "By closing time the body, mind and soul of Murphy were freely distributed over the floor of the saloon; and before another dayspring greyened the earth had been swept away with the sand, the beer, the butts, the glass, the matches, the spits, the vomit" (171). In a novel obsessed with quarantine and non-porosity, there could not be a more fitting disavowal of containment than scattered ashes—the contained (body, mind, and soul) reduced to its most elemental form. This is in direct contrast to Beckett's recurrent "womb-tomb" motif (Ricks 40–1), to use a phrase that he will later develop to emphasize the continuity of containment between birth and the grave. As Anzieu writes in relation to this scene, "the empty breast, i.e. the failure of the containing function, cannot be better imagined" (Schoolcraft 164). Beckett may have found inspiration for this scene in "Hydriotaphia," Sir Thomas Browne's well-known essay on urn burial, which he read at Trinity College (Byron 223). The mixing of Murphy's ashes with sand, butts, glass, matches, spit, and vomit reads as an ironic reinterpretation of the mixing of familial ashes together in the same urn (Browne 25). This comingling of human ashes with object matter is a fitting end for Murphy, "who was not tied by interest to a corpse-obedient matter and whose best friends had always been among things" (119).

CONCLUSION

This irretrievability of Murphy's ashes from surrounding matter would later find itself redoubled in Beckett's life, when he inquired—on behalf of Maria Jolas—about exhuming James Joyce's body in Zurich and moving it to Ireland. As Knowlson recounts: "'Seven years already,' the undertaker told Beckett, putting on a troubled expression, like a doctor who is being consulted too late: 'Do you think there will be anything left to transport?'" (334).

In addition to the mixing of the ashes with the pub detritus, Murphy's decision to be cremated in the first place might have been a final gesture towards protecting his vision of complete containment, to prevent his body and mind from becoming the container of something undesired. According to Browne, this anxiety is latent in burial: "To be gnawed out of our graves, to have our skulls made into drinking-bowls, and our bones turned into pipes, to delight and sport our enemies, are tragical abominations escaped in burning burials" (30). Without cremation, Murphy's skull and mind, which excluded nothing that it did not itself contain, could be forced to contain something that it would rather exclude.

It seems Beckett's fascination with vessels might be substituted for Breton's concern with surreality. That is, rather than the subject being superior or exterior to the object, Beckett envisions an immanent network of intercommunicating vessels. Like Malone's homunculi, which are formed within the contours of his body, and like his body itself, which is mechanized within a series of vessels, the container, as Breton says, is also the contents. The borderline between subject and the object begins to dissolve, as each mutually constructs and contains the other. Even Murphy, a character who quests for complete containment, is fated for complete enmeshment with the object world. Perhaps Billy in the Bowl marks the midpoint of this gathering between the "container-contained"—not a subject reduced to object, nor an object elevated to subject, but body and bowl together in Beckett's no-man's land.

Notes

1. It is uncertain how much of *Notre-Dame de Paris* Beckett actually read. In letter written on 18 September 1951 to Mania Peron, Beckett writes "J'essaie de lire *Notre-D. de Paris*. Impossible" (*Letters II* 297).

2. Descartes frequently uses the metaphor of the homunculus to describe the subject as the seat of consciousness. In "Of Vision," the sixth discourse of the *Optics*, he writes: "Now although this picture, in being so transmitted into our head, always retains some resemblance to the objects from which it proceeds, nevertheless, [. . .] the picture causes us to perceive the objects, as if there were yet other eyes in our brain with which we could apprehend it" (101). As Matthew Feldman has shown, Beckett studied L. Debricon's *Descartes: Choix de Textes*, which contains excerpts and summaries of the *Optics*, making familiarity with the content of this passage likely (47–8). Descartes neatly demonstrates the infinite regression implied by dualism—that eyes require an additional set of eyes that require an additional set of eyes … *ad infinitum*. Homunculi seem to insist upon their own homunculi. "Psychology *without* homunculi is impossible," writes Daniel Dennett in a discussion of this infinite regression, "but psychology *with* homunculi is doomed to circularity or infinite regress,

so psychology is impossible" (119–22; emphasis in original). The homunculus model leaves us with a vision of Pyre Gynt's onion—layer upon layer, membrane upon membrane, always differentiating, but organized around an absent center. It should be noted that Beckett does not solely source his homunculi from Descartes. Dirk Van Hulle has traced Beckett's interest in homunculi back to his *Faust* notes, as well as an article by Herbert Silberer entitled "Der Homunculus" (*Genetics* 167, 171).

3. Chris Ackerley annotates the passage in *Demented Particulars*, attributing the phrase to John Marston's *The Malcontent*, which Marston in turn drew from Richard II (2579–2594). It also seems to have connections to an opaque phrase in George Berkeley's *Commonplace Book*, which Beckett underlined with his infamous green pencil: "When we imagine 2 bowls v.g. moving in vacuo, 'tis onely conceiving a person affected with those sensations" (qtd. in Van Hulle and Nixon 133).

4. Samuel Beckett began therapy with Wilfred Bion shortly after Christmas 1933 (Knowlson 168). While the therapy was difficult and both men occasionally found themselves at odds with each other, there seems to have been some benefit, as the analysis continued for almost two years. Curiously, while both surely remembered their work together, Bion avoids referring explicitly to Beckett in his later writings, and Beckett hardly ever spoke about their encounter after it concluded. For this reason and others, Bion—who famously took Beckett to the Tavistock clinic to see C.G. Jung speak—has been relatively understudied in relation to Beckett's work (Miller and Souter 3–21). Due to a scarcity of records regarding Beckett's time with Bion, and the fact that most of Bion's well-known concepts were developed after the treatment ended, it is difficult to trace a direct connection between their therapeutic sessions and either man's writing. By implying that Bion may have found inspiration for the "container-contained" in *Murphy*, I am following Steven Connor, who suggests that we need to read Beckett into Bion as much as Bion into Beckett, and that doing so might reveal "an example of the most long-range and delayed-action countertransference on record" (13).

5. Elizabeth Klaver has argued that *Quad*, *Ohio Impromptu*, and *How It Is* all construct three-dimensional Klein bottles, "a system that offers no real beginning, ending, or exit" (378). S.E. Gontarski adds to Klaver's reading, suggesting that the Klein bottle structure of *Quad* is an attempt to represent four dimensions in three dimensions, much like Beckett's recurring crucifixion motif (175).

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